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TWO DRAMAS.

THE chief literary event of the year in Italy has been the publication of Gabriele d'Annunzio's "Francesca da Rimini." Its appearance has been heralded as an epoch in the history of letters. In the ingenuity and effrontery of their advertising many authors and publishers now bring a blush to the cheeks of the venders of Pear's soap and Sapolio; and the preparation for "Francesca" was a masterpiece of the art. From the first the public was taken into the confidence of the author. It was informed of the prodigious investigations that the author was making, of his unexampled mastery of the history of the time, of his steeping his soul in the very spirit of the age, of his absolute preparation for a work that should be worthy of Dante himself. Each stage in the writing of the sublime tragedy was carefully communicated to us through the timely indiscretion of over-enthusiastic friends. It was put upon the stage with every accessory and with the great Eleanora Duse—who, with most unchristian charity, had forgiven the unpardonable offense of "Il Fuoco," for which she is reported to have justly threatened the writer with death—in the title rôle. Finally it has been brought out by the Milan publishing house of the Fratelli Treves with such elegance of paper and typography that it is a delight to the eyes.

When it was seen only on the boards, the best critics confessed their inability to form an opinion of its literary merits. So potent was the charm of Signora Duse's acting that the coldest head could not say what part of the qualified success that the play met with was due to her consummate art and what part to the genius of the author. But now that it has come to us in cold print, it must be judged as a literary work, and as such it is weighed in the balance and found wanting.

In the first place, Signor d'Annunzio undertakes to employ

the language of Francesca's time—a time now some six hundred years ago. That is not the way great literature is produced. Great literature is written in the language in which the author babbled as a child. To this rule there are few exceptions save "Les Trophées" of M. Heredia and the "Faërie Queene." To write in an alien tongue or the language of a past age is like dancing on stilts. We may marvel at the dexterity of the performer who can dance at all under such conditions, but we are seldom called upon to admire the ease and grace of his movements.

Then one is annoyed with the great number of technical terms relating to mediæval life and warfare. In an elaborate archæological novel like Flaubert's "Salammbô," where there is plenty of opportunity for explanation, such things are commendable and informing; but in a drama they are out of place. It is like those later stories of Rudyard Kipling's, in which he undertakes to exhaust the terminology of every handicraft. Such things may be magnificent, but they are not literature. Shakespeare might write about the coasts of Bohemia and make the people of Troy talk of Aristotle, and still give us great poetry; but it is doubtful whether even Shakespeare could have extracted great poetry from the dry husks of the antiquary.

Nor is the piece characterized by any skillful portrayal or development of character, or by passages of remarkable poetic or rhetorical merit. Except the young fiend Malatestino, who is vigorously drawn, the personages are little better than lay figures. We can well conceive how, if put upon the stage by a manager who would spare no expense in reproducing the costumes, furniture and armor of the times, it might be interesting and instructive—as interesting and instructive as a visit to one of the old castles that has been refitted in mediæval style, of which few intelligent travelers fail to inspect one. But all that does not make a real drama. It may give us the basis of a splendid pageant and an animated picture of the turbulent life of the age; but that is not enough. The elder Dumas said that for a great tragedy you

need no stage setting save a table and a couple of chairs. True dramas deal with the hearts and minds of men and women, not with their surroundings and habiliments.

It cannot be said that there was a crying need for Signor d'Annunzio's drama. Dante had treated the subject in a few immortal lines which remain the most perfect gem of Italian poetry, and which some claim to be the finest single passage in literature. Silvio Pellico had written on the theme a noble tragedy in classic style—splendid in its diction, lofty and pure and sympathetic in the portrayal of the unhappy passion of the guilty pair; a tragedy that cleanses the heart and makes us pity the victims of

Vénus toute entière à sa proie attachée.

Stephen Phillips, in his "Paolo and Francesca," has recently enriched our language with a play that is full of passages of a haunting charm that is truly Elizabethan. Under such circumstances there was no demand for a new work upon the subject unless the writer had a distinctly novel and meritorious view to present. It must be confessed that Signor d'Annunzio's view is novel, but it is difficult to claim for it any great merit. It is brutal and degrading, without the exquisite art that redeems the moral depravity of his earlier writings. It arouses no sympathy for the actors. When the guilty pair are slain we are not sorry either for them or for the husband. We are neither moved nor elevated. The only feeling we experience is rather one of languid disgust for the whole business. Such a way of presenting a theme may be good history, but it is poor literature.

In the dedicatory poem to Signora Duse and in the concluding note the author exhibits a self-worship for which only "Il Fuoco" could have prepared us, and which makes us wonder if he is not at least partially insane. His earlier works, particularly "L'Innocente," "Il Trionfo della Morte," and "Le Vergini delle Rocce," with that wonderful prose that was sweet as music to the ear, promised great things; but it was permeated by a morbidness that threatened an early decay. We are in hopes that, like Goethe, he would

master himself, and grow in strength and beauty as in health. But the two disastrous failures of "Il Fuoco" and "Francesca" point rather to a fear of his following Guy de Maupassant, with whose great but unwholesome talent he has much in common, into the gulf of insanity.

In striking contrast with Signor d'Annunzio's drama is the "Monna Vanna" of M. Maeterlinck, which has been the literary sensation of the year in Paris. It came almost unheralded. It was presented quietly at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, one of the less noted theaters of the capital. It was printed simply and is to be had for the modest price of two francs. It was left to stand on its own merits, without support from any literary clique. Yet it has achieved an immediate success because it deserved it.

It is a genuine drama. It deals with thought and emotion, not with externals. It presents the true life of man, which is the life within. It treats of human hearts, not of clothes and armor. It is written in most pellucid French, not in the jargon of a past age. As with the "Francesca," the scene is laid in the period of the Renaissance, the theme being evidently suggested by the fate of Paolo Vitelli, but M. Maeterlinck does not think it necessary to overwhelm us with his antiquarian researches. Like Shakespeare, he is probably better off for having made very few. But he gives us living men and women, who enlist our sympathy from the first and whose fortunes we follow with interest to the end.

We all know M. Maeterlinck as the creator of a new and most exquisite dramatic form, thoroughly mediæval in its super-refined delicacy, its strange actors, more intense, more palpitating with emotion than it is given to mere mortals to be; and the man or woman who has not succumbed to his charm is to be pitied. But all this left us wholly unprepared for "Monna Vanna." Here we have no mystery-haunted castle, full of dark dungeons and secret passages leading no man knows whither; no beings that seem to have lived on the honey-dew and the odor of flowers, thrilling with emo-

tions too exquisite, too poignant for human speech. We have, instead, genuine men and a most genuine woman of most mortal flesh, who talk most reasonably—almost too reasonably for the drama. For M. Maeterlinck, in endeavoring to escape his old super-imaginative manner, has perhaps gone too far the other way, and become too reasoning, too logical for full dramatic effect. But he proves himself much broader than had been believed, and he has produced a drama which it is a pleasure to read; a drama which has vital movement, intelligent development, and a literary form that is ever pleasing.

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